A Look at Queerness in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

You would not believe how hot and sexy this Green Knight was. I, the anonymous poet, described just how hot and sexy he is for two whole pages.

He takes The Green Knight's axe, and the knight kneels before him, bearing his super sexy neck. And Gawain just goes and chops his head right off. But then, the Green Knight picks his head up, and gets back on his horse and says, "In one year, come meet me in the green chapel so I can return the blow." Everyone has a big laugh over this, and gets back to partying.

Actual medieval standards.

That scene with the girdle?

That counts as sodomy.

Our common, modern understanding of sodomy is very different from what it was in the medieval era. **In the middle ages,** sodomy was literally any sexual act that was not literally PIV (Penis in Vagina) between a married couple, with the intent of conceiving a child.

So, heterosexual couples having unmarried sex, or a married couple doing non-PIV things, were just as liable to pay a fine or do penance as two men, or two women, or anyone caught doing solo acts.

Seriously.
It was all basically on the same level.

Even further, the girdle itself is often used in medieval texts as a symbol for sodomy. But anyway, that's why this scene is incredibly funny. By medieval standards, what happens between Lady Bertilak and Gawain, is sodomy.

Describing the Green Knight

There's also the very lengthy descriptions of the Green Knight's powerful appearance. Some people discount homoerotic readings of this as like,

"The poet was just describing how big and powerful he was
to make him intimidating."

Yeah. For almost two entire pages. And his big loins and lovely neck get described in great detail, too. I'm sure that contributes a lot to describing his power, and not just how hot he is, but I digress.

How does the story Sir Gawain in The Green Knight, enact queerness in its era's own terms?

Well, as usual, a lot of this is connected to the constructs of gender themselves. In my video on women with short hair, I talked a bit about the Victorian era's idea that failing to properly present oneself, according to your assigned genders rules, can sometimes affectively ungender you entirely.

Something similar can be said for the middle ages.

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, medieval readers will have been well aware of the story **displaying open masculinization and demasculinization of Sir Gawain.**

Gawain is first masculinized by his establishment as a Knight, and his courageous approach to the Green Knight's game, and textually in the scene describing him being dressed in armor. But the minute Gawain becomes a guest at Bertilak's castle, the text tone around him shifts completely. While the men of the house rise early to hunt, Gawain femininely sleeps in, and is then hunted himself, sexually, by Lady Bertilak, pretending to be asleep when she enters. These things, don't read as demasculinization to the modern reader, but to the medieval sensibilities, this is clearly placing Gawain in the feminine role during the game. Rejecting the beautiful lady's advances, but delivering enthusiastic kisses to the stronger man, Lord Bertilak.

Meanwhile, it's the women at the story who flip, and adopt the masculine roles. Lady Bertilak is the pursuer, the dominant one in the exchange. And by far extension, Morgan Le Fay is the most dominant one of all, orchestrating everything from the shadows, and having Lord Bertilak assist her plan. By medieval standards, it's a clear display of gender play, because so much of gender at the time was hinged on actions, and how one acts with and around the opposite sex.

Explanation

The tension here comes back during Gawain's final encounter with the Green Knight in the green chapel. When his emasculation by Lady Bertilak is revealed by the Green Knight, Gawain attempts to reclaim his masculinity, by going on a bizarre misogynistic tirade, claiming that the lady was actually acting as some kind of Eve like temptress. Here, positioning her, and women at large, as the true sinner, he can reclaim his masculinity through the virtues of chivalry. He wasn't being dumbed, he was actually just resisting sinful temptation, like a very manly man would.

And it works. Gawain is accepted back into Arthur's Court as a hero, despite still wearing the green girdle, an obvious symbol for sexual intimacy. And also, a women's clothing item. Then again, they can't know exactly how he got it. He could say anything. And the bedroom scenes in the story carry even deeper weight as well, as a reflection of the medieval anxiety between heterosexuality as a social center point, and the innate homosocialiality, and homoeroticism, of everyday life.

David Lorenzo Boyd: "For if Gawain yields to his desires for the woman, taking her in effect, he will also be bound to yield his 'winnings' to Bertilak, to submit to him sexually.

In other words, his heterosexual role with a woman would also necessitate a passive homosexual one with a man, and the explicitly heterosexual act would necessarily, always already, carry a homosexual valance. His heterosexual desires are thus positioned to be intimately bound up with potential homosexual activity. The homosexual here being directly connected to his homosocial and chivalric relationship and oath to Bertilak. Ironically, then, it's a lack of homosexual desire that controls or prescribes the physical consummation of heterosexual desire."

But on the other hand, the text itself doesn't actually betray the specific reason for Gawain refusing the ladies advances. It's more heavily implied that it's due to his chivalry, and a conflict of knightly virtues. He does observe her as attractive and very beautiful. On the other hand, the text also heavily implies attraction between Lord Bertilak and Gawain in its wording. The way Gawain observes the lord and the lady are not all that different. And the ways he physically interacts with them are similar, though, Lord Bertilak, very distinctly, bonds more poignantly with Gawain, especially his being the Green Knight himself, the very opposite force upon whom Gawain is in battle with. This is not Gawain's only instance of being used as a tool for exploring medieval queerness, either.

In the Lancelot prose, Gawain is quoted as saying,

> "If God were to grant me my health, I'd immediately wish to be the most beautiful maiden in the world, happy and healthy, on condition that he would love me above all others, all his life and mine."
>
> Speaking of Lancelot, specifically, and this isn't really exclusive to Gawain either, **a lot of Arthurian tales and characters are kind of rolling in queer subtext.**

Or honestly, over text, because medieval writers were a lot less afraid of playing around with these subjects than you'd think. **As Ana Klososki Robert says in Queer Love in the Middle Ages,**

"Medieval writers actively exploit the security and the prestige of the classical and Occitan tradition provides them to explore the themes of same-sex preference and homoeroticism. Whether bundled with moral condemnation, or discredited in relation to narrative truth, so vague as to be frequently dismissed or omitted in the interpretation of allegorical love scripts, or flirting with homoeroticism by heavily borrowing from the arsenal of heterosexual romance perfect friendship narratives, same-sex preference seems rather a pervasive interest. It is smuggled into canonical works in recognizable ways."

When sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written,

an accusation of sodomy was seriously a big deal. Even though most of the time, it just lands you with a fine or a penance. It could ruin you socially in many cases. This is absolutely something the Gawain poet would have been aware of when writing the poem, but whether the poem is trying to directly reference anything is lost to time. But men kissing each other in and of itself, could mean a multitude of things in the era.

As Dorien Zwart writes,

"These platonic medieval kisses represent conventional cultural practice, informed by the rules of courtesy and hospitality. There's nothing problematic about men's kissing one another per se, in the medieval romance context. One could argue, thus, that the kiss is shared between Gawain and Bertilak are platonic, **but Richard E. Zeikowitz elaborates on**

why they're not.

'Since the narrative leads us to believe that Gawain fully lives up to his oath to offer Bertilak whatever he wins during the day, the kisses he gives him are equal to those he receives from the lady. By dismissing the eroticism of the male-male kisses, one also dismisses the sexual valence of the lady's kisses.' And those are obviously erotically coded."

And the fact is, since Bertilak reveals at the end

That he was behind it all, it's a clear admission that, in some way, he must desire Gawain. 'Cause he asked his wife to seduce Gawain very forwardly, and thus, Gawain must give Bertilak whatever he does with her.

> **Carolyn Dinshaw explains,**
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> **"We could imagine that** Bertilak had more agency in this whole plot that he finally admits to Gawain, that sending his wife into Gawain was a way of bonding himself, via the woman, to the man."
>
> Just guys being dudes.

Youtube Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmedp2ZvwBw